

The Nativity of Jesus, December 24, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

How could you go wrong with a story about a baby?! At least for today its “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” This is certainly THE STORY above all others of the birth of a child to a loving family – The archetype, the Story of Stories. The world outside stops for what has always been and always will be one of the most remarkable moments in human history: proof that we have a future.

And we've shaped and decorated this part of the story, because, I believe, it reflects something of our own deep longing to belong, to be loved, to be embraced into a place of peace, to be a part of a family that's at peace.

So, yes, “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” is a significant part of ‘the Christmas Story’, making very personal claims on us that have to do with things about our own families, and babies, as well as all the other ordinary things we do all the time, like cooking spaghetti or working on Excel spreadsheets or volunteering at Time Together, or Helping Hand, or Good Cheer, or the homeless shelter.

And hearing the story again, many of us are drawn back to specific memories of Christmases gone by – at least, the ones we want to remember! – with decorated trees, and stockings filled with gifts, and warmth both literal and emotional. And perhaps we remember that even more this Christmas when so many of us only just got that warmth back after days without power!

So here we are. For me, the one thing that screams “traditional Christmas” is a creche. A creche plays out the Christmas story in vivid, visual 3-D – like the one by the main doors – wooden barn, lots of straw, assorted domesticated animals, 3 wise men (why three?!) Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus in a wooden manger.

Of course, that's been taken over by the secular, holiday culture a little – you can now get a little carried away – why not – and accumulate some real folk art creches: how about a Bear Creche?! Or a Cat Creche?! Too gauche?

Part of the power of the Christmas story – the thing that makes it extra-special – is that it's more than all these things, greater than all these things, wider than all these things. Each year, this story makes some really sweeping claims that involve all sorts of really big things—powers and principalities, nations and kings, planets and star systems, and the future and peace, joy, love – and pain and loss – yes, those too – loss, and how we handle them.

So maybe tonight/today's more “gentle Jesus, meek and mild who has forever changed life the universe and everything?!” Or could change it, if we let him.....?

Of course, the challenge of these bigger things at this particular moment – this “Christmas Moment” – is that we'd rather not spend too much time on them at this particular moment. I get that. The world out there is a pretty miserable place for a lot of folk right now – how about some

respite care? Is that why you came? That's a good reason.

The challenge of this moment is that for a life of faith to have integrity, it can't be about escaping from the rest of our lives – if it was, if it is, if it has nothing to say about the rest of our lives, then it would lack genuine authenticity; it wouldn't be deserving of our attention and respect. If Jesus is only about “getting away from it all” then all the claims made about Christianity aren't worth the paper they're written on. If our faith is to be genuine, we can't separate it from the struggles of every-day world whether in the First Century or the Twenty-First – though of course that doesn't stop many from trying.

I don't believe that Christianity – Jesus – is about “getting away from it all.” I don't believe that Christianity is mainly about making sense of it all – though it does do that. I believe that Jesus is about transforming it all.

That means for us that if we are to be able to say “Amen” to the personal, warm feelings we have about the Christmas Story, it can only be in the context of our broader lives. This moment is about celebration, but that celebration is only genuine if the story is also about the rest of our lives, and how our lives can be transformed.

The truth is that this Christmas story is much more like the rest of our lives – or perhaps about what some folk refer to as the “real world” – than we often think. For instance, if you want to be historically accurate then you'll have to exchange the wooden barn for a cave, and the wooden manger for one carved out of stone - though you can keep the animals! (Well, maybe not the bears and cats!).

And there is a little bit more adjusting necessary beyond the creche: we'll have to include in our memory of the Christmas Story *all* the circumstances Luke describes around Jesus' birth : Luke tells us about a poor family forced to relocate in the dead of winter; he mentions a journey of about 126 miles on foot, only to be homeless when they arrive. And then, right after their child's birth, they're forced to flee to a foreign land under the mortal threat of a dictator and an Authoritarian regime. The more things change, the more they seem to stay the same – was I talking about Jesus, Mary, and Joseph fleeing authoritarian death in the Holy Land, or Jose, Maria, an Miguel fleeing authoritarian death in Guatemala?

Isn't every family holy in the sight of God? Isn't every baby – whether born in the gleaming hospitals of North America, or the gutted slums of Central America, or garbage-filled backwoods of Appalachian America – isn't every child a child of God – God's beloved?

If we only remember the domesticated half the Christmas story – the part with lowing animals, and straw, and manger – then it becomes a story built on denial's sandy foundations, and our Christmas achievement is to emasculate the power and significance of Jesus' birth. It means we are confirming that we, too, are living in self-imposed exile far from the sacred land, that we are a people who are, even now, walking in darkness.

Here's my thought about how to proceed. We recognize that tonight we're being shown a great

light; even though we might occasionally, or perhaps often, feel like we live in a land of deep darkness, light is still shining upon us. So let's remember both parts of this story we share in tonight – let's celebrate the baby, and the animals, and the manger – even the cats and the bears – **and** let's remember that this story Luke tells us contains within it the seeds for a moral uprising; let's remember that the great, Godly story of humanity's journey toward justice and righteousness were embedded into this story, which is our story – humanity's story – **from the beginning**.

Let's remember that the story of this light shining in darkness is what we tell this holy night. Let's tell the story with gentleness, and joy, and celebration. Let's tell it with the fond, familiar, warm feeling that comes to us as we recall the Christmases of Old. Let's tell it by singing carols of shepherds, and angels.

And let's tell it with a full-throated song of resistance to the powers that subjugate or seek to subjugate all those who are not them or not like them: all workers in the fields and mines. And assembly lines. And fast food restaurants, And classrooms, and every place where regular folk are being exploited. Let's sing this song with all those whose work is disrespected, and disregarded, and dismissed.

Let's sing this song with all the African-Americans, and Native Americans, and Latinos, and Women, and Gays and Lesbians, and everyone whose stories – like that of the First Family we remember today – are disrespected, disregarded and dismissed.

“This holy night, our song must be more than [only] sweet lullabies and romantic [carols]. Our song must [also] be one of protest and resistance, proclaiming that Christ's birth **is bringing righteousness to all the world.**” (Leah D. Schade) All The World, not just our little corner of heaven.

Yes, let's tell both sides of the Greatest Story Ever Told that we remember this night; and maybe, just maybe, it will change us. And maybe, just maybe we will be a part of something that can transform the world – if we can help it along, one small step at a time.

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on Earth, peace among those whom God favors’ – which, of course, is all of us.